

VZCZCXRO4330
PP RUEHCI
DE RUEHKA #1950/01 3521102
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 181102Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5828
INFO RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 9454
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 8234
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 1965
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0380
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT PRIORITY 0178
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ALMATY PRIORITY 0098
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT PRIORITY 0177
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE PRIORITY
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK PRIORITY 0065
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 1084
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0083

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001950

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/12/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: TWO NEW STUDIES SHINE LIGHT ON PUBLIC OPINION IN
BANGLADESH

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Geeta Pasi, reason 1.4(d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. Two recent studies -- a statistical poll conducted by the country's largest Bangla-language daily, Prothom Alo, and a new perception study by the Asia Foundation -- cast some light on public opinion as we approach the one-year anniversary of the state of emergency. The two complementary studies -- one statistical, one more sociological -- reveal a polarization in public opinion, with strong support for the government's political and anti-corruption agenda but equally high levels of concern over the economy. END SUMMARY.

PROTHOM ALO POLL: SURVEY SAYS...

12. (SBU) Prothom Alo, the country's largest daily Bangla-language newspaper, conducted a public opinion survey in September using a reputable local polling and research company. The findings are based on a random sampling of 1,500 people throughout the country.

MAIN ISSUES FACING THE COUNTRY

13. (SBU) Respondents were asked which top three problems faced the country. A large majority -- 77.7 percent -- said price hikes of essential commodities was the top problem, while 96.4 percent considered it one of the top three problems. Other concerns that ranked high included problems with utilities and unemployment. (NOTE: Cyclone Sidr occurred after the poll was taken, so any concerns about the efficacy of the government response to that disaster are not recorded in these numbers. END NOTE.)

14. (SBU) Respondents were asked to compare several governance indicators before and after the January 11, 2007 state of emergency declaration. Over 70 percent of respondents agreed that the law and order situation, governance, and education had improved since last year. In terms of areas that worsened, 60.3 percent identified the electricity crisis; 55.6 percent cited fertilizer distribution; 50.1 percent cited a worsening of living standards; and 49.3 percent said unemployment had increased. An overwhelming majority of those polled (84 percent) felt arresting politicians for

corruption and misappropriation of power was correct.

SUPPORT FOR POLITICAL PARTY REFORM

¶15. (SBU) A significant majority of respondents, 66.8 percent, supported political party reform. This sentiment was felt more strongly by urban respondents (81.9 percent) than rural ones (61.8 percent). Among possible reforms, respondents cited elimination of nomination selling, provisions for punishing those who break electoral regulations, internal democracy within parties, transparent fundraising, term limits, and party registration requirements.

IN COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION, HASINA FARES BETTER THAN ZIA

¶16. (SBU) People were asked their views on former prime ministers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. Fifty-nine percent felt that Hasina's retirement from politics would not be good for the country, while 32 percent felt it would be positive. Opinion was more evenly divided regarding Zia: 45.1 percent felt her retirement would be positive, and 43.5 felt it would be negative. More urban voters said Hasina's retirement would be a bad thing; more rural voters viewed Zia's retirement negatively.

¶17. (SBU) Half of respondents (51.5 percent) said the government took the wrong step in arresting Sheikh Hasina, versus 32.2 percent who said they agreed with the move. Since the poll was taken before Zia's arrest in early September, people were asked if Zia should be arrested. Forty-four percent said yes, and 33 percent said no, almost the exact inverse of Hasina. More people (40.5 percent

DHAKA 00001950 002 OF 003

versus 26.7 percent) felt Zia was corrupt than Hasina.

¶18. (SBU) In terms of Hasina's and Zia's terms as prime minister: 65.9 percent rated Zia's first term (1991-1996) as good; 75 percent rated Hasina's term (1996-2001) as good; and only 26.7 percent viewed Zia's second term (2001-2006) as good.

THE AUGUST DEMONSTRATIONS AND CURFEW

¶19. (SBU) A solid majority of respondents (59.7 percent) felt the imposition of a curfew in August to quell the demonstrations was a correct move by the government. Among urban respondents, 68.4 percent expressed this view, as compared to 57.3 percent of rural respondents, reflecting the fact that the demonstrations and curfew only affected the six largest cities in the country.

THE ASIA FOUNDATION PERCEPTION STUDY

¶10. (SBU) Unlike the Prothom Alo poll, The Asia Foundation (TAF) monthly perception surveys are not scientifically-based surveys, but rather perception assessments based on dialogues in all 64 districts in the country. The studies, which TAF has conducted since March, gather impressions from a cross-section of ordinary citizens as well as "elites," (i.e., civil society representatives, local businesspersons, political figures, etc.). Since they are conducted monthly, they provide a baseline for noting trends, unlike the one-time Prothom Alo survey. The results here reflect the most recent study, for October 2007.

SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT LEVELS OUT

¶11. (SBU) Overall confidence in the caretaker government has plateaued after a steep drop in the spring/summer. In October, 28.3 percent of ordinary citizens said they had high

or extremely high confidence in the government, down from 33.7 percent in September. In October, 41.7 percent said they had reasonable confidence in the government, about the same as the previous month. The percentage of respondents with low or extremely low confidence in the government rose from 25 percent in September to 30 percent in October. The percentages for the elite group were nearly identical.

¶12. (SBU) Nearly 60 percent of "ordinary citizens" and 47.4 percent of "elites" said they believed improved law and order and reduced corruption continued to be the aspects of the current situation providing the most assurance to the community. An increasing percentage of citizens mentioned steps taken by the government to prepare for elections -- up to 11 percent from September, making it the second-most popular government initiative. Over half of respondents felt the quality of education and health services in their localities had improved from last year. The price hike of essential commodities remained overwhelmingly the single greatest area of concern to those polled -- 87.4 percent of ordinary citizens (up from 83.2 percent in September) and 80.1 percent of elites (a large jump from 65.1 percent in September).

¶13. (SBU) Only 25 percent of respondents (similar in both groups) believed they are better off than they were one year ago, taking all things into consideration; about one-third feel they are worse off, and one-third feel there has been no change. About 60 percent feel they are better off in terms of the political and social situation; the same percentage feel they are worse off in terms of the economic situation.

COMMENT: THE TWO BANGLADESHS
=====

¶14. (C) The two complementary studies -- one scientific, one more sociological -- offer a good glimpse into the political and economic concerns of Bangladesh citizens. Politically, overall confidence in the anti-corruption drive continues,

DHAKA 00001950 003 OF 003

and people are increasingly confident in elections occurring by December 2008. As a result of satisfaction in these areas, the caretaker government still enjoys support, though it has dropped from highs earlier this year. In terms of concerns, economic issues trump issues like concern for human rights. Public dissatisfaction over price hikes and high unemployment is growing and presents a major challenge to the caretaker government.

¶15. (C) The Prothom Alo poll is the first to capture the difference of views regarding the corruption charges against Hasina and Zia. Hasina's stronger urban base, coupled with the higher level of skepticism about the charges against her, could serve as a convenient platform for future Awami League agitation; likewise, the low levels of support for Zia's last term as prime minister, the fact her support is greater in less politically organized rural areas, and the divided opinion about the legitimacy of the charges against her, could make her political rehabilitation more of an uphill challenge.
Pasi